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CONCERNING FRENCH CHÂTEAUX

By G. H. McCall

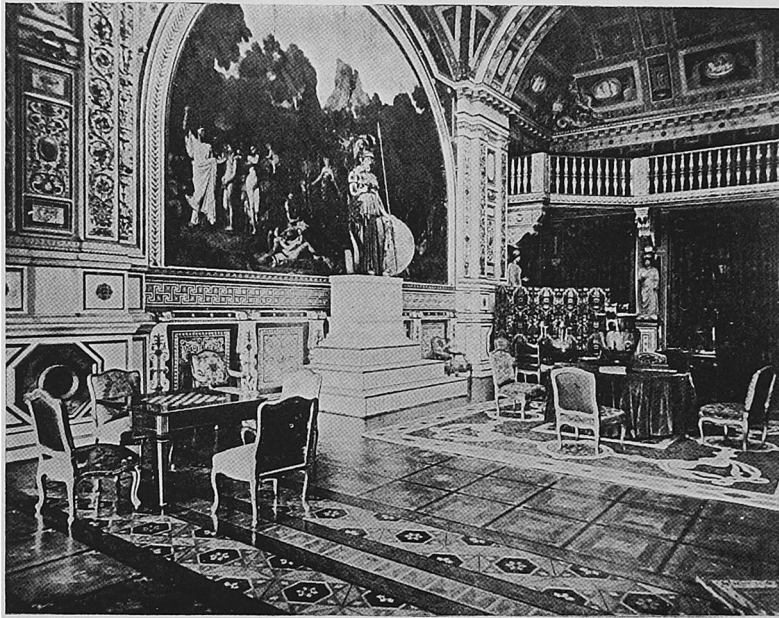
FRANCE is the country of the château, and in spite of wars and revolutions, which have been responsible for the loss of so many edifices, no other country can offer to artistic speculation a greater variety of beautiful dwellings. The history of the nation is written in these princely mansions, and they tell of the past with the precision of the chronicler. The course of the centuries is indelibly recorded, and ancestral souls have divulged their secrets in these ideals of glory, grace, and princely power. Their ruins are equally eloquent, and were it possible to interrogate their ancient stones, Coucy, recently more than ever destroyed, would respond in historic and romantic effusion before those of Versailles and Fontainebleau. The illustrious houses of the old French royalty, which still display their pomp and splendour, would not speak in clearer tones than the dismantled dungeons of the ancient feudal nobility.

The French noble was always building, and he loosened animation upon the earth with a certain independent sovereignty; adding to his life a durable sumptuousness which was to attest in the distant future the genius and resourcefulness of his race. Fortunately his tastes were favoured everywhere by a kindly nature, lavish in its distribution of fascinating aspects of landscape, with their vistas of water and forests; with their wealth of slate and stone. All these were at the very elbows of the builders; profuse in all the necessary requirements of his craft. Local circumstances, however, largely dictated the

substances used in mediæval building. If transport was too difficult to encourage the builder from getting his materials from afar he erected his edifices with the local product. Stone buildings were general only in stone districts, and where fine freestone was handy the buildings became more elaborate.

The constructing genius of the nation, in conjunction with the hereditary instincts of its princes, created freely and abundantly, and acquired a superiority which was to receive universal recognition. It was not in vain that the Gothic idea, which is French art *par excellence*, was born and developed on native soil. The masterpieces of marvellous churches erected at this period, innumerable châteaux, though they have not all survived, proclaimed their supremacy over the whole of Europe; giving credit to the knowledge and consummate skill of generations of artists, sculptors, ironworkers, tapestry weavers, and the like, who guided their construction and decoration through many vicissitudes of taste and changes of style. This was the rôle played by co-operative tradition, which, up till the time of the French Revolution, created for France a prodigious patrimony of beauty, without relaxation, but with a glorious fecundity.

The great financiers of the eighteenth century, who brought the refined handicraft of their time into the service of a new luxury, displayed in that way their heritage in the continuation of the churches, monasteries, and mansions of the middle ages. In the interval the versa-



THE SALON AT DAMPIERRE



THE CHÂTEAU OF JOSSELIN, BRITTANY

tility of the native genius was applied to the most diverse transformations; the fifteenth century, for example, had given those exquisite jewels of construction, perhaps the most precious in the national casket—the original creations of the French Renaissance. Always maintained and enriched by the influences of princely ostentation, this adornment of France still remains to emphasize its ancient magnificence; perhaps at times like the fragments of a broken mirror, in which it is yet possible to piece together a noble imagery.

The great French nobles, who had nearly all fought in the Italian wars with Charles VIII, Louis XII, and Francis I, brought home with them souvenirs of the luxurious habits, the taste, and feeling for sumptuous habitations; and in the edifices which were born of these campaigns, though they always preserved the dungeon and the principal towers as a sign of their ancient strength, they substituted their surrounding fortifications with splendid stables, flower gardens, and fountains—turning their strongholds into veritable *lieux de plaisance*. This was the Renaissance architecture blended to advantage, with a certain affectation, with antique details; giving rise to those new forms which were necessitated by the changed habits, and certainly much more appropriate to the French climate.

It has been said that the architecture itself was influenced by Italian types, and that the most beautiful conceptions had been designed by Italian artists; but this assertion is far from being correct. There is no analogy in the plans or in their distribution, neither in the windows or roofs nor any resemblance in the interior or exterior decorations. The Italian palace, both in town and country, always presents a certain rectangular mass, of a certain symmetrical disposition and form of

expression, which is not found in any French Renaissance château up to the time of Louis XIV. Even in the case of synchronous building no special effort at symmetry was made, and probably no complete design was preliminarily drawn out, or afterward followed. Design, indeed, was little needed until symmetry was demanded. The parts were thought out by different minds and created by varying hands, and the whole came together as best it could, the result proving fully satisfactory, owing to the instinctive sense of proportion and picturesqueness possessed by the mediæval craftsmen. If architecture, including the inward fitting and the outward walling, consisted solely of fixed profiles, some pilasters, or friezes decorated with arabesques, one would be willing to agree that the French Renaissance had become Italian, but the broader comparison demonstrates a strong indigenous individuality in the constructions of the French masters of building.

The harmony between necessity and form, the consideration of individual custom and structural convenience, the judicious employment of materials, and the respect for the traditions of the country, these are the principles which direct true architecture and decoration before everything, and these are the principles which directed the French architects of the Renaissance. They erected the châteaux still bearing the old feudal components, but enveloped them with an epicurean dignity in harmony with an elegant society, in accord with the demands of a society that was enlightened, polished, and chivalrous, though somewhat pedantic and mannered, which the sixteenth century disclosed. It may be a King's prerogative to overlook native art and employ foreign artists, but there is every indication that the royal agents set aside this privilege by adapting and extracting

those elements which were most conceivable with local art, requirements, taste, and feeling. An artistic instinct made the men of those early days seek ocular pleasure in their surroundings. Life was of necessity more restricted, more concentrated than it is to-day. Every joy had to be sought in immediate surroundings, and the beauty of things, made by craftsmen who delighted in their work, was made to endure, and by its endurance made to teach in its own unconscious way future generations how to improve upon the best of the past. This period is of engrossing interest, and admirably illustrates the adaptability of the old Gothic idea with that of the Renaissance—a mixture which, in some of its northern combinations, perhaps, may be open to criticism, but on the whole entitled even to retain the world's admiration—an admiration which will be more fully appreciated when the French Renaissance is studied in its more mature forms, free from the first blush and indefinite manner of the *débutante*, and that charm one associates with uncertainty of knowledge and popular favour.

The most remarkable châteaux of this brilliant epoch were those of Creil, Chantilly, and Verger, but these have long been destroyed; Chantilly, however, has risen again upon its old foundations. Of this period there still exist, among others, the châteaux of Chenonceaux, Josselin, Blois, Amboise, Chambord, and Loches,

The château of Josselin, in Brittany, shows this transition from the feudal to a less seigneurial type in a most interesting manner. Perched upon an escarpment overlooking the Oust, it presents its façade to the banks of the river, which washed against the base of its walls until a tow-path was recently established. The château is flanked by three great round towers with conical spires, the bases of which seem to grow out of their rocky

foundations. This façade offers the type of military architecture of the Middle Ages without its severity, just as the façade facing the court of honour presents that type of civil architecture of the late pointed period with all its luxury of ornamentation. The residential part is of one floor only, upon which are erected ten splendid dormer-windows of two tiers each, with lacy open-work pinnacles strengthened by tiny flying buttresses. Between these tower-like dormers, at the junction of the roof, a sculptured gallery traverses the whole façade; the details of this cornice are of infinite variety, and are treated with an incredible delicacy. The motive changes between each window, but is mainly occupied with the interlaced device *Au plus* formed into a miniature grille. The windows of the principal floor are regularly arranged, while those of the ground floor are disposed at unequal intervals, presenting a certain disorder which seems to disappear under the richness of the sculptured details. Immense gargoyles lean out from a number of twisted columns which terminate in spouts formed of grotesque masks. The sculptured coats of arms upon the façade help to fix the date of this magnificent château at the end of the fifteenth century.

When the iron hand of Richelieu and the absolutism of Louis XIV destroyed the last relics of feudalism, the châteaux took a new form, and preserved nothing of the signeurial habitations of the Middle Ages. The châteaux of Taulay, Ancy-le-Franc, Verneuil, Vaux, and Maisons, the ancient château of Versailles, and the destroyed châteaux of Meudon, Reuil, Richelieu, and Nivernais, were erected at the commencement of the seventeenth century, and were vast, open palaces, surrounded with magnificent gardens, easy of access, presenting a solid grandeur, and without false ornamentation, each in a

sense a compendium of luxurious dignity, comfort, and *bien-être*. The number of these princely habitations advanced during the course of the seventeenth century, and the century following. The new château of Versailles, the two Trianons, and Compiègne still attest the elegant tastes and refinements of the châtelains of those centuries. The châteaux erected since the French Revolution are pale imitations of those erected before, leaving those old forms to look with calm indifference upon the ever-changing generations of men who are forced to exploit them for any resemblance of a new idea.

To those who are prepared to imitate in some way late mediæval modes of life, late mediæval architecture, and decoration present a possible style as a foundation to meet developed ideas of accommodation. Necessary modifications made in original examples of the time have, in clever and capable hands, brought them sufficiently within modern conditions without destroying the essence and soul of the age which produced them. The modern architect, however, is more or less subservient to older models, and though he plans the whole and settles most details, his main difficulty lies in acquiring the unintentional symmetry of the mediæval forms.

In dealing with the most beautiful specimens of French château interiors space permits but a glance at this or that example, however disunited—"un peu de chaque chose, et rien du tout, à la françois," said Montaigne. At the same time it is not very easy to survey the intimate life of the Renaissance; the Middle Ages have been much more accommodating in their documentary relics, giving us two incomparable guides to work upon: the illuminator and the painter; but from the time of Francis I, from which the Renais-

sance practically starts, the manuscript rapidly disappeared, and the clientèle of the artist became a clientèle for luxury. Even museums fail to give one an idea of the life of the individual of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To form one's opinion on them is to follow a false route; one may as well judge the private life of the Romans by their marble or bronze *fauteuils*. Therefore the study of the interiors in question must of necessity be viewed with its luxurious background. Luxury is thought by many to be a standard of superior taste and education; it is not, however, to luxury itself, but to the general comfort and fitness of the dwelling, and of the requisites of life, one must look to obtain any just idea of how far their advancement in ornamental art can be taken as a guide. Luxury of decoration was confined to royalty, or to some of the most powerful families, and was even then displayed only on certain occasions.

The aim is to instil that feeling of unalloyed joy at finding among these typical specimens something untouched and unspoiled, showing that they have always been in the hands of those who evidently cared for them and appreciated every effect; showing so full a measure of taste and dexterity that the result is always estimable and often admirable. Such was the furnishing of the Renaissance idea, and to treat a house other than after the manner of its own age is to do it an injustice, and to waste an opportunity. To pack its rooms with the tawdry and meaningless abundance of "up-to-date" upholstery is of course absolute desecration. The endeavour should be to make a modest translation into a small compass of the elegant, though elaborate, parade of the past, both in plan and appearance without producing any feeling of overcrowding.